

The Honorable Bill Shuster, Chairman
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings and Emergency Management

How Do We Ensure a Robust Federal Response
To a Catastrophic Earthquake
In the New Madrid Region?
February 24, 2006

I want to thank Ms. Emerson for her work on this issue, including assembling a Congressional working group for the New Madrid Seismic Zone. I know you have a strong interest in ensuring the federal government has learned the hard lessons of Katrina and is prepared to respond to a catastrophic earthquake in the New Madrid region. I welcome your participation in today's hearing.

I would also like to thank Mr. Carnahan for his participation today. You have shown a great deal of interest in the response to Hurricane Katrina and reforming the current emergency management system. I look forward to your contribution to today's hearing.

I would ask unanimous consent that Ms. Emerson and Mr. Carnahan be permitted to sit with the Subcommittee at today's hearing, offer testimony, and ask questions.

I also want to thank our witnesses for being here today. We are meeting this morning to receive state and local input for improving the emergency management capabilities and readiness at the federal, state, and local levels. Hurricane Katrina revealed problems in the emergency management system at all levels of government that have to be addressed, and you have a role in guiding the efforts to fix these problems. After all, you are the end users.

Unfortunately, this hasn't always been a collaborative process. Too often, the federal government has failed to take into account your views. There has never been a greater need for your professional advice and expertise. We have to get this right, and we need your help to do it.

Like Hurricane Katrina, a catastrophic earthquake in the New Madrid region could destroy the infrastructure, leave tens of thousands homeless, and paralyze the region. The New Madrid seismic region stretches from Arkansas and Mississippi, north through Tennessee, Missouri, Kentucky, and Illinois. Since 1974, over 4,000 earthquakes, most too small to notice, have been recorded. The large metropolitan areas of Memphis, Tennessee, and St. Louis, Missouri are located in the New Madrid seismic region. Because this region lacks widespread seismic building codes, it is estimated that a 7.7 magnitude earthquake in the region will cause a direct economic loss of over \$70 billion and the destruction of over 60 percent of buildings in the region. Without reforms to the current emergency management system, we will have another disorganized federal response like that in the Gulf Coast.

I was on the House Select Committee that investigated the response to Hurricane Katrina, and our key findings of the federal failure were that the plan was flawed and the execution was ineffective. There was confusion over who had the authority to make decisions. Response

capabilities were deficient. In some places, it took a week before the federal government even arrived. Is the New Madrid region prepared to be on its own for a week, even though conventional wisdom says you only need to be prepared for 72 hours?

The House Select Committee report found that the federal response to Hurricane Katrina was slowed because key decisions were made late, ineffectively, or not at all. Today, these key decisions about how and when to engage federal response assets are no longer in FEMA. They are with DHS.

Also, DHS and FEMA responded to Katrina with a business as usual attitude. Business as usual means sitting back and waiting for the state to request assistance, instead of proactively getting supplies into the field prior to a formal request. Business as usual does not work in a catastrophic disaster.

Following a catastrophic earthquake, the state and local governments may need federal assistance before there is a clear operating picture. If federal assistance is needed immediately to save lives and prevent suffering, should the federal government wait for the state to follow protocol? Can the people of the New Madrid region wait for help while the federal government demands that the state follows bureaucratic procedures? We cannot afford to get it wrong again.

Additionally, the report found that the government failed to effectively execute response plans and authorities. This failure can be attributed to an inadequate professional disaster workforce. At the time Katrina struck, FEMA had 500 vacancies. This is a small agency within a big department. They cannot afford to be without that many people. Without the right number of the right people, this will never work.

If we are to successfully respond to a catastrophic earthquake, we must enhance state and local emergency management capacity. One of the important lessons of Katrina is that the federal government's ability to respond to a catastrophic disaster is often dependent upon the quality of the state and local disaster system. Disaster management is a shared responsibility and state and local governments need to be able to handle most disasters on their own and be prepared to integrate federal assistance into their operations during larger events.

Despite spending about \$3 billion dollars a year on first responder grants since September 11th, it is very difficult to see where those dollars resulted in improved capabilities or readiness in our response to Hurricane Katrina. The report found that inadequate capabilities and readiness resulted in the federal response being overwhelmed in critical areas such as logistics, communications, situational awareness, and command and control. It is truly staggering that we have spent so much on preparedness and have so little to show for it. We have to do better.

These are systemic failures. Clearly the system needs to be reformed. We are here today to hear about the specific challenges you face and your recommendations for reform at the federal level. At the end of the day, if the federal government fails to reform itself, then the state and local governments will have to face the next catastrophic disaster and its consequences largely alone for the first week or longer. I look forward to hearing from you today. Thank you.